DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 175 266 FL 010 535

AUTHOR Herschensohn, Julia
TITLE Generic Sentences in English and French.
PUB DATE Dec 78
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Linguistic Society of America Meeting (New York, December 29, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Determiners (Languages); English; *Form Classes (Languages); French; *Grammar; Language Patterns; Language Research; *Morphology (Languages); Nominals; Semantics; *Structural Analysis; *Syntax
IDENTIFIERS *Generic

ABSTRACT

Previous accounts of "generic" have been either too broad in including several sentence types as generic, or too narrow in limiting the definition of generic to the noun or verb alone. This research critically examines data and previous treatments of the generic verb, generic noun, and generic sentence. Because every generic sentence may also have a non-generic interpretation, it is impossible to posit a unique underlying source of generics or a unique rule of semantic interpretation. This paper proposes that the interpretation of a sentence may be generic if the noun is unmarked for reference and the verb unmarked for tense and aspect. Thus generic sentences do not constitute a class apart, but are at the "abstract" pole of a continuum, (for example: The beaver builds dams.) whose opposite pole is the "concrete-referential" (for example: This beaver is building a dam.). This paper further proposes that definite/indefinite generics must be considered in relationship to one another, not in isolation. (Author/NCR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED175266

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

GENERIC SENTENCES IN ENGLISH AND FRENCH

© Julia Herschensohn, Cornell University

Paper presented at the LSA Winter Meeting, 1978, Friday Dec. 29, 12:15pm
Syntax/Semantics II, Ballroom East

Previous accounts of 'generic' have been either too broad in including several sentence types as generic, or too narrow in limiting the definition of generic to the noun or verb alone. In this paper I will critically examine data and previous treatments of the generic verb, the generic noun, and the generic sentence. I will conclude that generic sentences are not set apart by a unique underlying structure, syntactic or semantic, but that they are interpreted by the same mechanisms that are necessary for the interpretation of non-specific nouns and habitual verbs.

The term 'generic' is an adjective properly applied to nouns which represent a class or a typical member of a class. This term may also be used to refer to sentences which predicate an action or state of generic nouns. Generic sentences are timeless, that is, tenseless and aspectless, and usually have the present as the unmarked tense as in sentence (1).

(1) The beaver builds dams.

Dinosaurs require the past as the unmarked tense in sentence (2), but when a meaningful contrast is possible between present and past, as for beavers, only a non-generic reading is possible when the verb is marked for tense or aspect, as sentences (3) and (4) show.

(3) NG (non-generic) The beaver built dams.

(4) NG The beaver is building dams.

A010535

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Julia Herschensohn
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Apparent counter-examples to this restriction are sentences such as (5) and (6) whose verbs are marked for present progressive and past perfective respectively.

(5) The beaver is becoming rare these days.

(6) The railroad eliminated the need for canals in the 19th century.

In these sentences the noun refers generically to a class rather than to an individual, but the verb is not tenseless and aspectless. These sentences are frequently treated as generic, but strictly speaking, they are not; only the noun is generic.

The importance of timelessness in generic sentences has led to the investigation of the verb rather than the noun as the source of genericness for the sentence. Noting that it is not one noun, but all the nouns of a sentence which are given a generic interpretation, Chafe proposes that the verb can be optionally inflected with the semantic unit <u>generic</u>, an inflection which determines the genericness of the accompanying nouns. Lawler also concentrates on the verb in studying what he calls the 'generic present tense' exemplified by sentences (7) and (8).

(7) This beaver builds dams.

(8) Generally/ Usually/ Every day Delmer walks to school.

There are two difficulties with Chafe's and Lawler's approaches which invalidate their analyses: first, by isolating the verb, they preclude an account of the generic noun in its own right. Sentences such as (5) and (6) with generic nouns, but without generic verbs, are excluded from their consideration. In this respect the verb oriented

analysis is too narrow, but with regard to the second difficulty, it is too broad. This difficulty is that Chafe and Lawler do not distinguish between habitual and generic sentences. The difference between (7), which is habitual, and (1), which is strictly generic, is that the subject of (7) is specific, that is, it has a real world referent, whereas the subject of (1) is non-specific. Bowers clafifies the difference between generic and habitual sentences, pointing out that in both English and Navajo these two sentence types share many syntactic characteristics, such as the same conditions on tense and aspect, and the acceptability of frequency adverbs (as those in sentence (8)). There is then a difference between habitual and generic sentences based on the specificity of the subject noun; the habitual, that is, timeless, nature of the verb is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the genericness of a sentence. Generic verbs do not constitute a class apart marked by a special inflection, but are identical to habitual verbs. Furthermore, the generic interpretation of a verb depends on the specificity of its subject noun; the generic noun is not, as Chafe claims, a function of the verb.

I will now turn to the generic noun and its article, first presenting data, and then examining noun oriented treatments of generics. In both English and French there are three types of generic nouns as distinguished by the article, the definite singular (in sentence (9)), the indefinite singular (in sentence (10)), and the plural (in sentence (11)).

(9) The beaver builds dams.
Le castor construit des digues.

(10) A beaver builds dams.
Un castor construit des digues.

(11) Beavers build dams.
Les/ *Des castors construisent des digues.
the sm beavers build sm dams

The interpretation of the definite and plural articles is similar to that of the universal quantifier all in sentence (12), while the interpretation of the indefinite is similar to that of the existential quantifier any in sentence (13).

(12) All beavers build dams.

(13) Any beaver builds dams.

In English the definite plural usually prohibits a generic reading as in sentence (14), while in French the indefinite plural is excluded from a generic reading since it is generally ungrammatical in subject position, as in sentence (11).

(14) NG The beavers build dams.

Due to the limited scope of this paper I will not deal with plural generics.

All generic nouns are non-specific, but not all non-specific nouns are generic. The definite article may refer to a specific entity in the real world, as sentence (14), or to a generic class, as sentence (9). The indefinite article, on the other hand, may be non-specific without necessarily being generic as sentences (15)-(18) indicate.

(15) Jane wants to marry a Swede. (opaque)
Jeanne veut épouser un Suédois.

a. But she can't find one. (-specific)
Mais elle ne peut pas en trouver un.

b. And frankly, I don't like him. (+specific)
Et franchement, je ne l'aime pas du tout.

(16) John will find a book. (opaque)
Jean trouvera un livre.

(17) John didn't catch a fish. (-specific)

(18) He was an honest man. (-specific)
C'était un honnête homme.

There are several non-specific uses of the indefinite article in English and French, while there is only one non-specific use of the definite article, that is, the generic use.

It is possible to have a generic noun in subject or oblique position, but in oblique position only the definite article may have a generic interpretation, as the contrast between sentences (19) and (20) shows.

(19) John is writing an article on the generic sentence.
Jean écrit un article sur la phrase générique.

(20) John is writing an article on NG a generic sentence.
Jean écrit un article sur une phrase générique.

A generic noun may then be defined as any non-specific noun (definite or indefinite) in subject position; or a definite non-specific noun in oblique position. It is possible to speak of the generic noun as the definite generic, since it can be independently defined as the non-specific definite. The indefinite generic, however, exists only as a function of the generic sentence as a whole and is not distinct from other non-specific indefinites; it is impossible to isolate the indefinite generic, since it is defined by its syntactic function.

Perlmutter and Burton-Roberts have, nevertheless, attempted to separate the indefinite generic from the definite generic and from other uses of the indefinite. Perlmutter proposes deriving the indefinite generic article from the quantifier <u>any</u>. Burton-Roberts proposes

deriving it from a subjectless predicate such that 'X is Y' derives from 'to be X is to be Y'. Their arguments are not tenable because there is no syntactic evidence to support a unique derivation of the generic indefinite article, and also because the transformations they propose are unmotivated and posit unrecoverable sources. Furthermore, Nunberg and Pan point out that there are logical differences between quantified nouns and simple generics: (13) with the quantifier _any_ may be falsified by any counter-example, but (10) with the indefinite article may not be. This argument invalidates Perlmutter's hypothesis, and could be extended to eliminate the universal quantifier _all_ (as in sentence (12)) as a source for definite or plural generics such as those in (9) and (11). Sentences with quantifiers, although similar in interpretation to those with generic articles, must not be included among generics, or held to be a source of generic articles.

Noun oriented approaches to generics fail because the generic noun usually cannot be isolated from its sentence. The same attribute, non-specificity, is the characteristic which distinguishes generic nouns, both definite and indefinite. Any attempt to segregate definite and indefinite generic articles denies their basic syntactic and semantic cohesion. An analysis of generic nouns must focus not on the derivation of an article, but instead on the functioning of the non-specific subject in the whole sentence. Since neither the noun nor the verb alone suffices to render a sentence generic, an adequate account of generics must be based on semantic interpretation of the whole sentence, not of its parts.

Jackendoff seeks to explain genericness by sentential interpretation, by proposing a modal operator 'generic' which determines the non-specificity of surface subjects. He offers no syntactic proof for the existence of this modal operator and admits that 'it is hard to determine what syntactic element of the sentence should be considered to contain the modal operator generic.' (p. 309) The other modal operators he proposes are related to certain classes of lexical items (e.g. modals, negation), but this operator is arbitrarily assigned. Since there is no way to delimit its distribution, it could be assigned to any sentence, even to those which are not generic. Thus Jackendoff's proposal is formally inadequate, and furthermore provides no explanation of generic definite nouns in non-generic sentences (as (5), (6), and (19)).

Any analysis which proposes an underlying feature 'generic' for verb, noun or sentence, ignores the fact that generic sentences do not constitute a distinct syntactic class, but rather represent one possible interpretation of a sentence. A sentence may be interpreted as generic if its verb is unmarked for tense and aspect and if its nouns are unquantified and non-specific. This definition excludes habitual sentences such as (7) and (8) which look like generic sentences, but which have a non-generic noun. It also excludes sentences which have a generic noun with a verb marked for tense or aspect such as sentences (5), (6) and (19). Whatever mechanism is necessary to interpret generic sentences is independently needed to interpret habitual verbs and non-

and non-specific nouns. Generic sentences do not constitute a class apart, but are just a degree more generic than sentences which have an habitual verb or a generic noun. They represent the abstract pole of a continuum whose opposite pole is the concrete, typified by a specific noun and a verb inflected for tense and aspect. The generic use of the definite and indefinite articles is not distinct from, but complementary to their referential use. The function of the article is primarily referential, so that its usual interpretation is not generic. In cases where specific reference cannot be assigned to a subject noun or definite oblique noun, the noun may have a generic interpretation. If a sentence has a non-specific noun in subject position and an habitual verb, it is a generic sentence. As the generic function of the article is inseparable from its referential function, so too is the generic sentence inseparable from its referential counterpart. The abstract generic versus the concrete referential is a semantic characterization which represents two ends of a spectrum, not two distinct entities.

REFERENCES

Bowers, John (1968) 'Generic Sentences in English and Navaho' unpub. ms.

Burton-Roberts, Noel (1976) 'On the Generic Indefinite Article' Language LII, p. 427-448.

Chafe, Wallace (1970) Meaning and the Structure of Language. University of Chicago Press (Chicago).

Jackendoff, Ray (1972) Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar. MIT Press (Cambridge).

Lawler, John (1972) 'Generic to a Fault' CLS 8. Chicago Linguistic Society (Chicago). p. 247-258.

Lawler, John (1973) 'Tracking the Generic Toad' CLS 9. Chicago Linguistic Society (Chicago). p. 320-331.

Nunberg, Geoffrey and Chiahua Pan (1975) 'Inferring Quantification in Generic Sentences' CLS 11. Chicago Linguistic Society (Chicago). p. 412-42

Perlmutter, David (1970) 'On the Article in English' in Bierwisch, Manfred and Karl Heidolph (eds.) Progress in Linguistics. Mouton (The Hague). p. 233-348.